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SHORTAGE >>

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quarter-horse gelding, gives a 38-year-old, black-bay Arabian mare an injection in an eye, clears a bean, a hardened knot of oil, dirt and dead skin cells, from the urethra of a draft horse, vaccinates a dozen or so horses, examines the teeth of that many or more, and collects samples of horse droppings in plastic sandwich bags.

Being a large-animal veterinarian, a horse doctor in DeBlanc's case, is not exactly glamorous work. And it can be dangerous, too.

"I've been kicked a lot," DeBlanc said. "I've been kicked by mules. I've been kicked by cattle. Last year in Las Lunas I got kicked square on the knee. A horse that rears up on its back legs and is falling with its hooves is more dangerous than a horse that just kicks."

Long, hard hours, risks that come with the work, debt caused by the cost of attending schools of veterinary medicine, relative low pay and emotional stress are among the factors that have caused a decline in this country in the number of large-animal veterinarians — people who care for horses and other livestock such as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats.

DeBlanc is not immune to the challenges of her profession, but she perseveres because she loves what she does.

"I'll never get rich at this," she said. "In midsummer I can get super tired, and I feel burned out some time. But the best part of my job is the relationship I have with my clients. I care for my clients. And I get to play with horses every day."

High price to pay

In an article written for Paddock Paper, the newsletter of the Northern New Mexico Horsemen's Association, retired veterinarian Lynn Allen of Santa Fe, citing the American Association of Equine Practitioners, writes that of the 4,000 veterinarians who graduate each year from 50 United States and two Caribbean veterinary schools, only 3.8% pursue the exclusive practice of equine medicine, and of those, half will leave equine medicine within five years.

"There are only about 4,000 equine veterinarians in the U.S., and the number is shrinking due to retirement, those leaving equine medicine and fewer entering equine practice," Allen wrote in the Paddock Paper article.

Berkley Chesen, 48, operates a Santa Fe veterinary practice called Equine Comprehensive Wellness. She works primarily with Eastern and Western show horses, although she responds to emergency calls for backyard horses, ranch horses, any kind of horse.

She said she definitely sees a shortage of veterinarians for small and large animals. "There has been a very big shift over the last 15 years, probably longer," she said. "There are a lot of different reasons. One is that the debt of new veterinarians coming out of veterinary schools is close to \$200,000, and starting salaries have not kept up with inflation and cost of living."

In her Paddock Paper piece, Allen writes that veterinary school graduates specializing in companion animals and pets, start with a mean salary of \$103,881, and those working exclusively in equine medicine start at \$54,538. She also reports that, overall, veterinarians work an average of 45 hours per week.

Chesen, who did her undergraduate work at the University of Nebraska, graduated from the veterinary school at Purdue, spent five years at Harvard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington, Kentucky, and then did a surgical residency at Texas A&M, said she is no longer dealing with student debt. But she said the overhead for veterinarians is costly.

"Most veterinarians have a lot of equipment they have to



Albuquerque veterinarian Diana DeBlanc cleans Lovia's eyes after treating the 30-year-old Arabian in her Los Lunas corral.



DeBlanc completes her examination of Lenny, a handsome red dun gelding, in Valencia County.

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LARGE ANIMAL VETERINARIAN

“

buy out of pocket," she said. "A digital X-ray machine costs close to \$100,000, an ultrasound \$30,000 to \$50,000."

A woman's work

Most veterinarians today are women. The American Veterinary Medical Association listed 73,900 practicing veterinarians in 2021, about two-thirds of whom were women.

DeBlanc, a native of Gallup who earned her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from Colorado State in 1985, said that when she was attending veterinarian school, she believes 70% of veterinary students were women. Now, she

believes it's closer to 90%.

One reason DeBlanc thinks more veterinarians are opting for small-animal practice these days is that kind of practice, in which animals are brought to a veterinarian's office, fits in better with the lives of women who wish to have children than does large-animal medicine, in which the veterinarian usually has to go to the animal, sometimes at odd hours and in remote places.

Chesen, the single mother of two young daughters, says she often works seven days a week. "There are some days I work only two hours and there are days I work 24 hours and days that don't end and go right

into the next," she said. "I do share calls with a couple of other veterinarians. I try to have some protected time. It is not a perfect system, but it is definitely helpful."

Profession in crisis

Nothing is more expressive of the pressures in the veterinary profession than the high rate of suicide among veterinarians. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 400 veterinarians took their own lives between 1978 and 2015. CDC statistics show that male veterinarians are twice as likely to commit suicide as the general population, and female veterinarians are about four times more likely to take their own lives than the general population.

"I think you would be hard-pressed to find any veterinarian today who has not had a personal relationship with a veterinarian who has taken their own life," Chesen said. "I can think of two I know quite well. I can think of others who have suffered with addiction and substance abuse. It is a profession in crisis."

Factors blamed for this are pretty much the same ones that make a veterinarian's job demanding — financial difficulties and long, hard hours, both of which can create turmoil in a family, the expectations of animal owners and frequent euthanasia.

Chesen said veterinarians tend to be perfectionists who feel a lot of responsibility for their animal patients and the animals' owners, tend to have a lot of empathy, and tend to take on the pain of the animals they treat and the grief of owners who lose beloved animals.

She said veterinarians are often faced with euthanizing

animals, not only those that are beyond help but also those who might be healed or cured but at a cost owners cannot afford.

"People think we can do this expensive work at no cost," Chesen said. "But we are not like doctors in a hospital. We are not subsidized. It is not an option to do a lot of pro bono work."

Sometimes veterinarians must euthanize animals they have been treating for a decade or more.

"I think euthanizing animals is very hard on some veterinarians," DeBlanc said. "But I have a different philosophy on death. If I euthanize an animal humanely, I think it is a gift."

Chesen said veterinarians are also favorite targets for attacks in social media and frequent subjects of cyberbullying.

"All of this results in a lot of unhealthy coping methods — suicide, substance abuse, conflicts within the family," she said.

Funding the future

Concerned about a shortage of young people from New Mexico studying to be large-animal veterinarians, the Northern New Mexico Horsemen's Association established the Karen and Eldon Beyer Youth Scholarship. Named in honor of the memory of two prominent horse people, the scholarship helps pay the tuition of young people studying for an equine or agricultural career.

The first two recipients, Savannah McSween and Emily Adams, both of Albuquerque, received \$2,000 each. McSween, 18, a Cibola High School graduate, is a freshman majoring in animal science at New Mexico State, and Adams, 18, a Highland High graduate, is a freshman majoring in animal science at Montana State.

McSween wants to be a large-animal veterinarian and Adams wants to pursue either a large-animal or mixed-animal practice. Both have heard about the difficulties confronting the veterinary profession, but neither feels deterred at this point in their lives.

"I have a really large passion for animals and want to be able to help in any way I can," McSween said. "It's been really hard to get a veterinarian for my animals because we don't have as many as we should."

Adams said she knows a lot of people who wanted to go to veterinarian school but changed their minds when they heard about the hardships.

"But I've wanted to be a veterinarian since I was 9 years old," she said. "I enjoy working outside and being around animals, and can't think of any other kind of work I'd rather do."



DeBlanc is greeted by Ryan, a Great Pyrenees, as she makes a stop in Bosque Farms to treat a horse.